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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 007623

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SUBJECT: IVLP ALUMNI BREAKFAST DISCUSSES DIVERSITY IN FRANCE

REF: NONE

¶1. SUMMARY: The Ambassador recently hosted a breakfast discussion for IVLP returnees, the eighth in a series that has now become an established routine here. This latest event brought together eight recent IVLP and VolVis alumni - including government officials, researchers, entrepreneurs, and NGO representatives - for a discussion of "Diversity and Pluralism in the U.S." and how it compares to the integration experience in France. END SUMMARY.

¶2. On October 31, Ambassador Stapleton hosted the seventh in a series of alumni breakfast discussions that have now become routine at this post. This breakfast brought together eight IVLP/VolVis alumni, who are government officials, researchers, entrepreneurs, and NGO representatives in France, to discuss their exchange experiences, in general, and to compare, more specifically, U.S. and French perspectives on diversity and tolerance as they relate to their particular fields. A major theme of the discussion was the difficulty that even well educated French minorities have in access to employment and political power as well as the challenges first and second generation immigrant youth face in their integration into mainstream society.

¶3. The participants were:

- Christophe (Adj) AHOUDIAN, Ali BAKRI and Sidibe BALLA, members of a youth association, VolVis 2006
- Carole DA SILVA, director of an NGO to assist youth for jobs, IVLP 2006
- Manuel MARTINEZ, local elected official and HR director, IVLP 2006

- Sophie NERBONNE, from CNIL (French Data Protection Authority),  
IVLP 2003

- Aziz SENNI, entrepreneur and author, IVLP 2006

- Mouna VIPREY, researcher, author, IVLP 2004

¶4. Welcoming the guests along with the Ambassador and participating in the discussion were the DCM, POL Min-Counselor, ECON Min-Counselor, PA Min-Counselor and ACAO Exchanges Officer.

¶5. All of the guests had an opportunity to speak, and each explained how important his or her trip to the U.S. was for understanding how Americans address the issues of diversity and integration. This led to a discussion of the continuing debates in France over who is a minority; how/whether they should be identified; and whether affirmative action is an appropriate remedy to address problems of discrimination.

¶6. With French presidential elections only months away, the suburban riots of 2005 still a recent memory, and the underlying causes of those riots still present, integration remains a controversial topic in France. The breakfast discussion became somewhat heated when the issue of monitoring the success (or lack thereof) of minorities within French corporations was raised. Some stressed privacy issues, concerned that any identification of minority status could be used for discriminatory purposes and/or place too heavy a burden on businesses. Others expressed concern that "privacy protection" might be used to avoid addressing racial problems. The latter cited the so-called "French model of integration" as only serving to preserve the (unequal) status quo.

¶7. The representative of the French Data Protection Authority (CNIL), an independent institution that makes recommendations to the French government on these issues, asked the other IVLP alums present to participate in a series of hearings CNIL will soon hold on diversity and integration. She expressed hope that they would be able to make useful suggestions and recommendations based on the new perspectives gained from their IVLP experiences in the U.S.

¶8. The breakfast concluded with a lively exchange of business cards and contact information. One attendee, just back from her IVLP trip, said the visit was energizing: "far from calming me down, it gave me even more energy and reasons to fight for diversity and integration in France, reaffirming my conviction that there are models that can work for us in France."

¶9. Lessons learned: The experience of these breakfast encounters reaffirms for us the continuing relevance of the IVLP and VolVis exchange programs to Mission efforts to influence public debate in France. On the subject of diversity, the exchange experience in the U.S. gave these individuals new tools with which to participate in and advance the democratic process here. Post will continue follow up with these USG exchange alumni and continue to involve them in our public diplomacy program activities.

STAPLETON